

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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Broad-leaved evergreen shrubs in the home landscape

By Jim May

Some of the most highly prized landscape plants are broad-leaved evergreens. With their wide array of sizes, textures and shapes, they are valued both as background “foundation” plants and as specimen plants, always commanding attention. They are true aristocrats of the landscape and develop into beautiful plants if given protection from the wind, the right soil, enough moisture and some afternoon shade.

These plants are grown chiefly for their evergreen foliage, but many of them possess other desirable ornamental traits including berries and incredible flower displays. They are generally clean plants, dropping few leaves at any one time, and they seldom become overgrown and weedy as some other ornamentals do. In addition, most of them are relatively free from insect and disease problems.

Probably the most commonly grown broad-leaved evergreen shrubs are Rhododendrons and with good reason. They are the ultimate background plant with their size, shape and coarse texture. The incredible flower display in the spring is always much anticipated and has no rival. This is one plant that can't be over planted. The plant genus *Rhododendron* is the largest group of woody ornamental plants in the world and also includes azaleas. More than 2,000 species, varieties and hybrids have been recognized.

Winter wind can be very damaging to this group of plants because of their large leaves with a lot of exposed surface area. Have you ever noticed that your rhododendrons curl their leaves downward in very cold weather? They do this because they need to transport water and nutrients from their roots to their leaves year-round and decreasing the amount of surface area exposed allows the leaves to hold on to precious moisture.

Another type of very popular broad-leaved evergreen plants is the hollies. American holly (*Ilex opaca*) is a beautiful native tree that graces many of our woodlands. Its green leaves and red berries have been used for centuries as holiday greenery. The landscape value of American holly has been overshadowed by the introduction of Nellie R. Stevens (*Ilex* x ‘Nellie R. Stevens’) and Foster’s holly (*Ilex* x *attenuata* ‘Foster’s’). These fast growing cultivars have dense pyramidal forms and heavy berry set. Their manageable 15’ to 30’ size helps make them very popular in the landscape trade.

A native holly that deserves mention is the inkberry (*Ilex glabra*). It has smaller leaves and its black berries are not nearly as flashy as some of its red-berried cousins. It is hardy down to Zone 5,

but some leaves will turn brown in severe winters or in windy locations. Again, a little protection from winter wind and afternoon sun really helps this plant thrive.

The Meserve hybrid hollies (*Ilex x meserveae*) have become very popular in recent years. Blue girl, Blue Boy, Blue Princess and Blue Prince are some of the cultivars of this group. Like many hollies, they require a male pollinator for good berry set and are considered some of the hardiest of the hollies. Other Meserve hybrids include China Boy, China Girl, Dragon Lady and Golden Girl.

Japanese hollies (*Ilex crenata*) have very small leaves and growth habit ranging from a low growing, almost prostrate form ('Tiny Tim') to an upright, pyramidal habit ('Steeds') and everything in between. These are excellent for textural differences in foundation plantings, along walkways and as hedges. Often these are pruned into topiary shapes.

One last holly to mention is the Chinese holly (*Ilex cornuta*). The species is not reliably hardy in the colder parts of Virginia, but two of its cultivars, 'Burfordii' and 'Dwarf Burfordii' seem to be hardier and will survive anywhere in the state, especially if protected.

Other broad-leaved evergreen shrubs for home landscapes include glossy abelia (*Abelia grandiflora*). This shrub produces a flower display from May till frost and will remain evergreen in mild winters. Harsher winters will tend to make it lose leaves and some twigs will die and need to be pruned out in the spring.

Oregon grape-holly and leather-leaf mahonia (*Mahonia aquifolium* and *M. bealei*) are interesting, shade-loving, upright, coarse textured evergreen shrubs that can be used as specimen plants, or in a shrub border.

Obviously, entire books could be (and have been) written on broad-leaved evergreens. I can only touch on the subject here. Several things all of these plants seem to have in common are: they all like some shade, moist acidic soil and protection from the winter wind. All require soil with good drainage to really thrive. Poorly drained soil may not kill these plants directly, but will predispose them to insects and diseases such as root rot.

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.